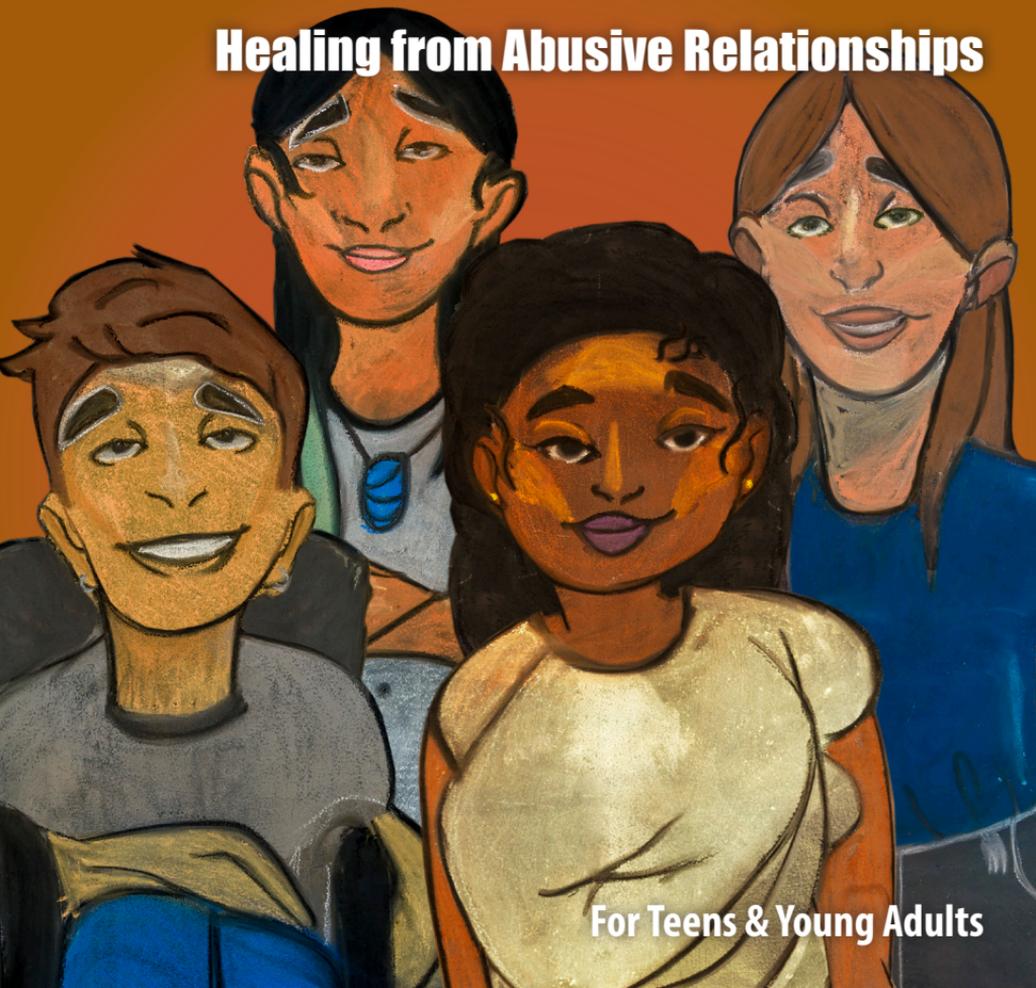


# Healing from Abusive Relationships



For Teens & Young Adults



Relationships – whether with your friends, someone you are dating or hanging out with, or with parents or teachers – are so important to our lives. Healthy relationships create a sense of belonging, bring out the best in you, and make you feel confident and supported. In healthy relationships we feel good, *most* of the time, trust each other, and look forward to being together.

Unfortunately, some relationships are not healthy and are sometimes even abusive. In fact, about 25% of teens will experience some form of abuse by the time they graduate from high school. While girls and teens who are gender nonconforming experience higher rates of abuse, anyone, regardless of gender, can be the target of abuse or engage in abusive behavior.

Is your relationship making you feel sad, scared, or uncomfortable? If so, it's not healthy for you.

## Warning Signs of an Unhealthy or Abusive Relationship

Most people who are abusive do not accept responsibility, so blaming the person they harm becomes part of the abuse. If you're not sure if you're experiencing abuse, here are some examples of abusive behaviors:

### Emotional Abuse

- Makes fun of you, calls you names or criticizes you, especially in front of others.
- Doesn't let you hang out with friends and family, or shows up uninvited when you are with friends or family.
- Blames you for everything, makes you feel unsafe or afraid to tell the truth.
- Threatens to "out" you or share information with others to harm you.
- Goes through your things, acts jealous, or accuses you of cheating.
- Threatens suicide or to hurt themselves, you, or someone you care about.

### Technological Abuse

- Tells you who you can or can't be friends with on social media.
- Sends you insulting or threatening texts, messages, tweets, etc.
- Uses Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and other apps to monitor you or puts you down in their social media posts or blogs.



- Sends you unwanted, explicit pictures and/or demands you send them.
- Steals or demands passwords to your phone or online accounts.
- Constantly texts you or makes you feel like you can't be separated from your phone for fear of being abused.
- Looks through your phone frequently and looks at your pictures, texts, and call log.

### **Physical Abuse**

- Shakes, grabs you or pulls your hair when you don't want them to.
- Slaps, punches or kicks you.
- Uses objects to hurt you.
- Restrains you or doesn't let you leave a particular area.
- Attempts to, or actually strangles you or puts pressure on your chest or throat.

### **Sexual Abuse**

- Touches or kisses you when you don't want it.
- Pressures or forces you to engage in any unwanted sexual activity.
- Prevents you from using birth control or refuses to use birth control themselves.

## **Specific Communities**

Many groups of people experience discrimination and unfair treatment based on their identity, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability. If you identify with one or more of these communities, you may experience specific forms of abuse and experience additional fears and concerns. While many of the warning signs of abuse are the same for any relationship, if you identify from a specific community, seek out friends or a trusted adult from *your* community who can help you find resources that feel safe to you.

### **LGBTQ or Gender Nonconforming Youth**

If you identify as LGBTQ or gender nonconforming, you may be afraid of "being outed" by your partner if you're not out to everyone. You may also understandably fear that seeking help will make you a target of harassment or bullying. Your abusive partner may exploit these fears to isolate you and keep you in the relationship. And if your family, school, or community is not tolerant of your sexual orientation and/or gender identity, this can be a barrier to turning to anyone for support.

**So, What Should I Do?** Reach out to LGBTQ organizations or school clubs like a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), to find out LGBTQ resources. You may also find a supportive counselor or teacher who can help you find resources that will be helpful to you.



## Youth with Undocumented Status or Dreamers

If you are undocumented or a Dreamer, your partner may tell you that if you call the police to get help you will be deported. Or you may fear telling a school staff member or other community member out of concern your information may lead to an investigation that could ultimately lead to the deportation of you or your abusive partner.

**So, What Should I Do?** Heightened immigration enforcement policies have justifiably increased fear of some groups to contact law enforcement. If you do not have immigration status or are a Dreamer in the United States, contact an attorney, or someone who is licensed to better understand the implications of your status when looking to get help with an abusive relationship.

## Communities of Color or Indigenous Communities

If you identify as a person of color, your relationship is in the context of current racism and our country's history of discrimination (such as, slavery of the Black community and genocide of the Indigenous communities), and false narratives of white superiority that gave rise to white supremacy. You may experience an increased impact of the abusive relationship because of the everyday stress of being a person of color.

**So, What Should I Do?** You may fear reaching out for help from the criminal justice or other systems because of historic and ongoing oppression and harm to your community by those systems. Find trusted adults in your community who can help you find resources that will be helpful to you.

## Youth with Disabilities

If you identify as a person with a physical, mental, or cognitive or intellectual disability, you may depend on others to meet some or many of your basic needs or use assistive devices. You may have had your daily needs or assistive devices used against you as a coercive tactic to control you. You may feel shame from overly trusting the person who was abusing you or complying with requests from your partner that made you uncomfortable. You may also experience barriers in seeking help based on stereotypes that individuals with disabilities do not have dating relationships.

**So, What Should I Do?** Find trusted adults in the disability advocacy organizations, like an Independent Living Center or Protection & Advocacy organization, that can help you advocate for your self-determination and enhance your safety.



## Tell Someone About the Abusive Relationship

While it can be hard to do, telling someone about what is happening is courageous and an act of self-love. Talking about your relationship might feel embarrassing or awkward; preparing what you're going to say first can help. Think of the main things you want to tell someone you trust, and then practice saying those things in your head or even practice aloud when you're alone. Practicing helps reduce fear and ultimately builds confidence. When you're ready, tell someone you trust and keep talking until you get help.

Your friends may be great to confide in, but this depends on your situation. If you're being seriously abused, you should tell a trusted adult – for example, a parent or family member, teacher, counselor, or school nurse. If the person you confide in questions your experience or doesn't believe you, find another adult and tell them.

You may also feel comfortable talking to an advocate at a community or tribal domestic and/or sexual violence program or a professional social worker, counselor, or physician. Depending on the state, some professionals are mandated (required by law) to report physical and sexual abuse of anyone under 18 to authorities, like law enforcement or child protective services. Be sure to ask the adult you choose if they are a mandated reporter and what the impact of you sharing with them would be.

## Safety Planning Process

Safety planning is a process to help you to think of ways to lower your risk of being harmed. You can download a safety planning guide at <http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Teen-Safety-Plan.pdf>.

While no one can control another person's behavior, you can find ways to keep yourself as safe as possible, whether you decide to end the relationship or not. Here's a couple key things to consider:

- If you and your partner go to the same school, you may be able to adjust your class schedule or find other ways to feel safer. Talk to a school counselor or teacher you trust.
- Avoid isolated areas at school and local hangouts. Don't walk alone or wear earphones.
- Keep friends or family close when attending parties or events.
- Save any threatening or harassing messages. Set your profile to private on social networking sites and ask friends to do the same.
- Change the passwords on your social media and other online accounts.



## Support a Friend in an Abusive Relationship

When someone is abused or sexually assaulted, they usually tell a friend first, if they tell anyone. Sometimes they don't say anything, but you may notice something is wrong and be worried about them.

While it can be hard to know what to do, you have a lot of influence in encouraging your friend to get the help they need. Here are a few suggestions to help a friend:

**Start the Conversation** – Begin a conversation from a place of concern, avoid judgment or lecturing. Let your friend know what you've noticed and don't be afraid to tell them you're worried. Be sure your friend knows that no one deserves to be hurt and that you aren't blaming them for anything.

**Listen and Be Supportive** – Ask them to share anything they feel comfortable sharing, then really listen. It's not your job to gather all the facts, just to support and listen. Let your friend talk about the abuse or sexual assault in the way that they need to. Make them feel safe with you as the person they choose to talk to and give them time to share their experience. Know your friend may not recognize the abuse (which may happen through texts, on the phone, or online), might be afraid or

embarrassed to talk about a sexual assault, or may be confused about what happened to them. Also understand that your friend may not realize that coerced sex (when someone manipulates, tricks, or guilt-trips a person into sex) is sexual assault. If your friend didn't want it to happen, then it shouldn't have. If your friend was sexually assaulted, encourage them to seek immediate medical treatment.

### Things to Say –

Encourage your friend to **get help from a trusted adult**, and help them connect to the resources they need. Don't judge your friend. Here's examples of things to say:

- "I'm here for you."
- "I'm sorry this happened to you. No one deserves to be hurt."
- "It's not your fault."
- "I am worried about you."
- "How can I help?" or "What do you need?"



**Stay Connected** – Your friend needs you to listen and be supportive. Respond with understanding and empathy, not anger. Your friend may not want help from anyone. Understand what you see or hear may make you frustrated and upset. Don't close the door of communication by threatening to do something they don't want. Also, expect that your friend may share and then not say anything to you for several weeks or even months. Don't pressure them to talk, just let them know you are available when they want to talk.

**Get Support** – Your friend may feel more comfortable talking about the situation with someone anonymously over the phone, in that case, help them reach out to a local domestic or sexual violence organization, or one of the national support helplines listed on the back of this booklet. You can also call the helplines to get support in how to help your friend.

## What About the Relationship?

If you're in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, figuring out the next steps can be hard. You may still have feelings for this person and have a history with them. It can be a confusing and there is a lot to consider. It can be hard for people to understand that the person who is harming you isn't always abusive, and that the times when they aren't make it hard to end the relationship.

### Staying Together

If you decide to stay together, make sure you are honest with yourself about your decision. While an unhealthy relationship can become healthy with enough time and dedication, it is unrealistic to expect to "fix" an abusive relationship. Remember, at the end of the day, you can only change your own behavior, not your partner's.

### Breaking Up

Listen to your instincts. If you feel afraid, you probably have a good reason and should have support from a trusted adult when you break up with an abusive partner. Additionally, your abusive partner may not accept the break up or respect your boundaries, or they may try to control



you through guilt, insults, or threats. If you're thinking of ending your relationship, consider these tips:

- If you don't feel safe, don't break up in person. It may seem mean to break up over the phone or by text, but it may be the safest way.
- If you break up in person, do it in a public place. Have friends or your parents wait nearby. Take a cell phone with you.
- Don't try to explain your reasons for ending the relationship more than once. There is nothing you can say that will make your partner happy with your decision.
- Let your friends and parents know you are ending your relationship, especially if you think your partner will try come to your house or other place you frequent to confront you when you're alone.

## How Did This Happen to Me?

It is common to blame yourself for the abuse in your relationship, even though it is not your fault. You may be wondering about your own actions – could you have done something differently that would have prevented the abuse from happening?

Emotions can feel intense in relationships. It can feel like your whole life revolves around your partner, which is both exciting and overwhelming. Sometime these intense feelings make it hard to recognize abusive behaviors. Additionally, abuse in relationships often begins with behaviors that can be easily explained or downplayed such as name-calling, threats, jealousy, or distrust. Over time, abusive and controlling behaviors may intensify, while at the same time, the abusive partner often apologizes or promises to change.

You might also feel like you need to do a lot, change who you are, or give up part of yourself to make the relationship work. You might have made excuses or blamed yourself—“they didn't mean it,” “I don't want them to get into trouble,” “I am the one responsible for their abusive behavior.” Maybe you're worried your friends will blame you. Or maybe you're not sure if the behavior is unhealthy or abusive because you know and trust the person and it doesn't happen all the time. The bottom line - you are not responsible for the abuse. You are not to blame.



## What You Can Do for You

Abusive relationships can affect your whole being. Self-care allows you to respond to stress by addressing your emotional and physical needs. Practicing daily self-care is an important step you can take for your health and well-being. Here's some suggestions for good self-care:

**Kindness** – Be compassionate with yourself.

**Rest** – Try to sleep 6 to 8 hours each night.

**Breathe** – Practice breathing deeply, low and s-l-o-w. Try to take three low and s-l-o-w breaths, from down in your belly button. Slowly raise your arms on the inhale and lower your arms on the exhale.

**Water** – Drink water and stay hydrated throughout the day.

**Support** – Spend time with friends and family who accept and support you and make you happy.

**Spaciousness** – Take five minutes a day to do something fun, read a book, or go on a short walk.

## Legal Options

If you are under 18, mandatory reporting laws require some people, such as doctors, teachers, counselors, to report certain crimes you may have experienced as a part of your relationship. You should know this going forward because these individuals may be forced to report what you tell them to law enforcement or another agency. **It is okay for you to ask if someone is a mandated reporter before you share your story or experience.**

### Reporting to School or Criminal Legal System

This section will help you explore and think about your options if you choose to report to your school or college or contact the police regarding the abuse in your relationship. It is important that you weigh your options and make the choice that is best for you. For some people reporting to the school or to law enforcement is a very empowering experience, unfortunately for others it is not.

**You will have to share what happened.** Sharing your experience of the abuse is a very personal thing, and if you choose to report the abuse you will be asked to talk about it in detail. It is important to know this going in, so you are ready, and can decide if you want to pursue legal actions.



**It is possible that not everyone will believe what happened to you.**

People will question your story or may try to blame you. And remember, in the legal system a person being found guilty or convicted is not guaranteed.

**You might feel a loss of control.** Some people find reporting to be an empowering experience; however, others feel a loss of control as decisions about what happens with their information are made for them. The criminal legal process can be long and drawn out, and unfortunately you will not have much control over the events or over the outcome. This does not necessarily mean it will be a negative experience, but it can be. Having an advocate help you during the process can help you regain control in this confusing process, since they have a better understanding of the system and can explain it to you.

### **School-based Reporting Options**

You have the option to report the abuse to your school or college. Schools that receive money from the federal government (almost every school) are required under Title IX to ensure an environment free from sex and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence. Generally speaking, schools are legally required to ensure that individuals who experience violence in relationships can continue their education. Examples of options a school or college may offer to someone who is in an abuse relationship

include academic accommodations or schedule changes, school-based no contact orders, dorm and class transfers, and mental health support. Regardless of whether you report the assault to law enforcement, your school should take its own actions, including a thorough and impartial investigation, which may result in possible suspension or expulsion of the partner who was abusive from the school. If your school does not take the abuse seriously or is not responding, consider seeking help from a trusted adult to contact an attorney.

### **Criminal Reporting Options**

You also have the right to file a police report. The length of time that passed since the abuse may guide what happens when you contact the police. If you report the abuse to law enforcement, you may be assigned a victim witness coordinator who will assist you through the criminal justice process to lessen re-victimization and connect you to resources. However, as employees of the criminal justice system, victim witness coordinators have limits on confidentiality and may be required to share information you disclosed to them with others, such as an officer, detective, or prosecutor, who then may be required to provide the information to the defendant through the defense attorney. After the law enforcement investigation, the prosecutor in the location where the crime occurred gets to decide whether or not to file criminal charges.



## Civil & Criminal Orders of Protection

The civil and criminal legal systems have two types of orders. A community or tribal domestic violence program advocate may be able to help you decide if you want to access either process.

**Civil Protection Orders (CPO)** – Most states have options for minors in an abusive relationship to file a petition for a civil protection order. There is no cost to file the petition and you do not need an attorney. The paperwork for a civil protection order is available at your local court clerk’s office in the courthouse.

**Criminal No Contact Orders (NCO)** – If there is an ongoing criminal case regarding abuse in your relationship, the judge will usually issue a no contact order requiring that the person using the violence (the defendant in a case) stay away from and not harass the person experiencing the violence. You can ask the court to modify or terminate an order, but it is done at the court’s discretion. Generally, NCOs are only valid as long as a case is ongoing (so if the charges are dropped, the order ends).

## Why Does This Happen in Our Communities

Gender violence is a problem in our society that affects all communities. Gender violence can include abusive relationships/teen dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, domestic violence, and sex trafficking. While everyone is hurt by violence, girls, women, and people who are gender nonconforming are hurt by abuse and rape the most.

Gender violence is common in our society because of our cultural beliefs and what we consider to be “normal” or “acceptable.” In our culture, men are given more value and power than any other gender. This leads to high rates of gender violence.

Gender violence does not happen in isolation. Gender violence is supported by larger forces or systemic oppressions, like patriarchy, which takes power over and harms girls and women. Systemic oppressions are the ways in which history, culture, beliefs, institutional practices, and policies interact to keep a ranking or power for some over others.

Our society values human beings based on identities, like gender, race, national origin, class, sexuality, ability, immigration, or refugee status. Ranking human beings supports the power and privileges that some groups of people hold to keep power over others.



## 24/7 Helplines

**National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline:** 1-866-331-9474 – Speak with peer advocates or text LOVEIS to 22522. The crisis text line provides round-the-clock support for anyone in crisis which can be reached by texting HOME to 741741.

**National Sexual Assault Hotline:** 1-800-656-4673 – Get help and referrals from advocates.

**Trevor Lifeline (for LGBTQ\* youth):** 1-866-488-7386 – Crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth.

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255 – Free, confidential support for people in crisis.

**National Runaway Safeline:** 1-800-786-2929 – Share your story and build a plan.

**National Street Harassment Hotline:** 1-855-897-5910 – Support, advice, and information.

## Additional Resources

This booklet provides you with some of the information you may need to make the choices that are best for you. Here are more online resources:

**[www.OurGenderRevolution.org](http://www.OurGenderRevolution.org)** – Information on how teens can be activists and organizers in their community to end violence

**[www.OneLove.org](http://www.OneLove.org)** – Information healthy and unhealthy relationships

**[www.BreaktheCycle.org](http://www.BreaktheCycle.org)** – Learn about dating abuse

**[www.thatsnotcool.com](http://www.thatsnotcool.com)** – Learn about online dating abuse

**[www.KnowYourIX](http://www.KnowYourIX)** – Information for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault

**[www.RookieMag.org](http://www.RookieMag.org)** – Articles written by teens for teens, such as “We’re Called Survivors Because We Are Still Here,” by Sadie Doyle

**[www.TeenVogue.com](http://www.TeenVogue.com)** – Articles on healthy and abusive relationships

**[www.EverydayFeminism.org](http://www.EverydayFeminism.org)** – Deeper exploration of why abuse happens in our society



**[www.OurGenderRevolution.org](http://www.OurGenderRevolution.org)**

Our Gender Revolution is a project of the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence

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